



# OPERATION BOATSWAIN

## Mystery and Tragedy in the Mediterranean

*Special Operations Executive/Palmach*  
*May 1941*



# Paul McCue

34 years in the public/governmental sector,  
including responsibility as Armed Forces Advisor  
to a local government area of London.

Moved to the private sector as Managing Director  
of a London-based leisure and culture company.  
Retired 2018 to take over **SECRET WW2**.

Military and local historian, author and researcher.

Resident of Hampshire, 75 kms south-west of London.





Executive Trustee of

**SECRET WW2**

The Secret WW2 Learning Network

- a UK-registered educational charity

Aims:

*Educate – Commemorate - Inspire*

With thanks for the invitation to participate to:

BG (Res) Erez David Maisel

and for inspiration to

Martin Sugarman.

Photo and image credits: Palmach Museum, Tel Aviv; Richard Neale, David Rose and Tony McCallum, Surrey, England



Please use the Chat function to submit any questions, (hopefully) for answer at the conclusion of this presentation.

## A background of tensions:

1936 – British restrictions on Jewish immigration into Mandate Palestine – 1/3 of what the Jewish Agency wanted

1937 Peel Commission – Britain decided Mandate was unworkable and partition necessary

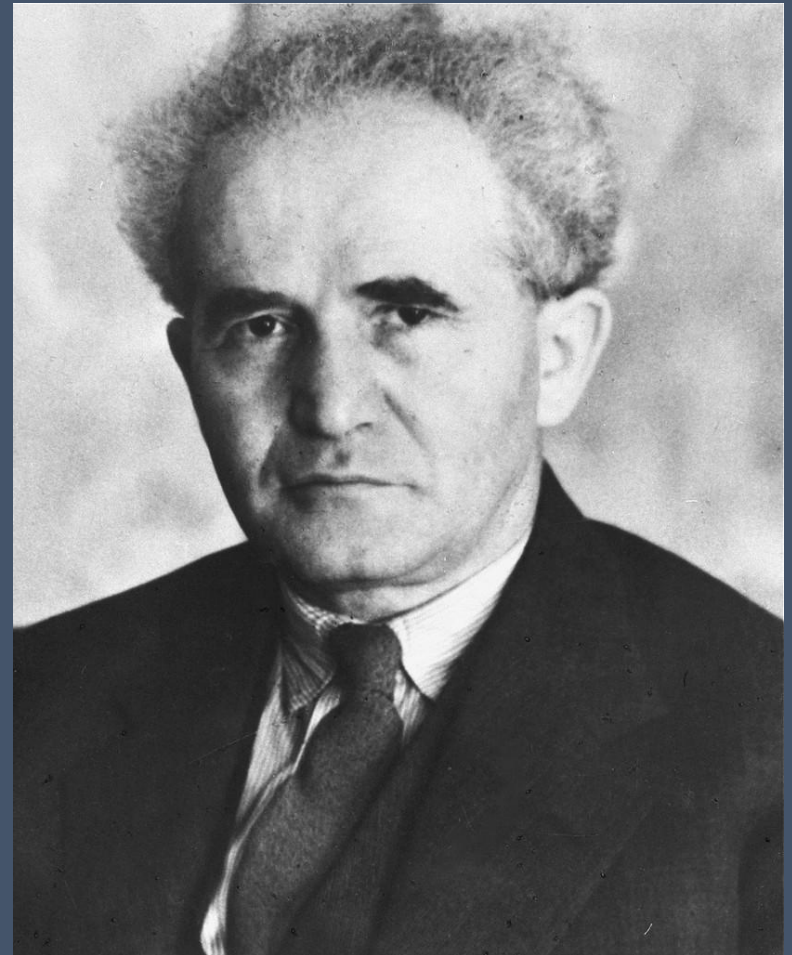
May 1939 British White Paper – decided partition was unworkable, so approved a Jewish homeland – but in one, independent state, which would have a large Arab majority population. Continued immigration restrictions and restricted Jewish land purchases. Demonstrations, strikes.



Sept 1939: start of WW2

David Ben-Gurion, then  
head of the Jewish  
Agency for Palestine,  
declared:

*“We will fight the White  
Paper as if there is no war,  
and fight the war as if  
there is no White Paper.”*



June 1940: defeat of France – Vichy French government for part of France, German (and Italian) occupied zones – and overseas territories.

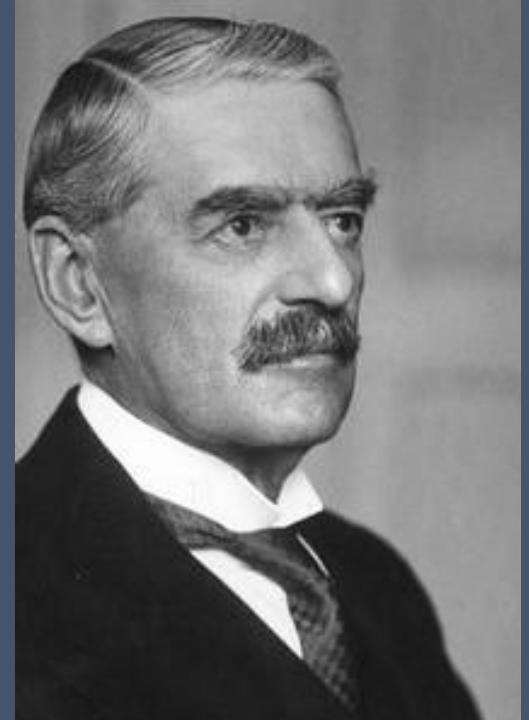
A threatened German invasion of Britain – but the British immediately wanted to continue the fight in enemy-occupied Europe.



The Special Operations Executive (SOE).

SOE's founding charter was signed by Neville Chamberlain, the former Prime Minister and the then Lord President of the Council, on 19 July 1940.

Chamberlain had been Prime Minister for the 1939 White Paper

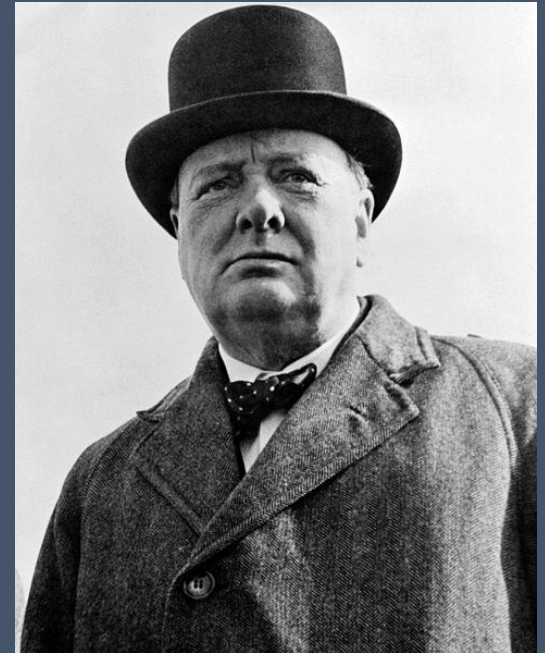


SOE was to conduct subversion, sabotage and reconnaissance in occupied Europe against the Axis powers, and to aid local resistance movements.

SOE having been founded, Prime Minister Winston Churchill then ordered it to - *“Set Europe ablaze”* – albeit a global organisation.

Conflict with Secret Intelligence Service (SIS/MI6)

- *hush, hush* versus *bang bang*.





## The role of SOE in Mandate Palestine

From soon after its inception in 1940, SOE had become involved with the Haganah, the previously-underground army of the Jewish community (Yishuv) in Palestine, which faced the common enemy of the Axis powers and the potential of a German thrust, led by the German General (later Field Marshal) Rommel from North Africa towards Egypt and Mandate Palestine.



SOE began funding and helping with military training for Haganah members (known as the 'Friends') – but from its Cairo/Middle East offices and largely without the knowledge of the British Mandate colonial authorities in Jerusalem.

SOE under pressure for results.

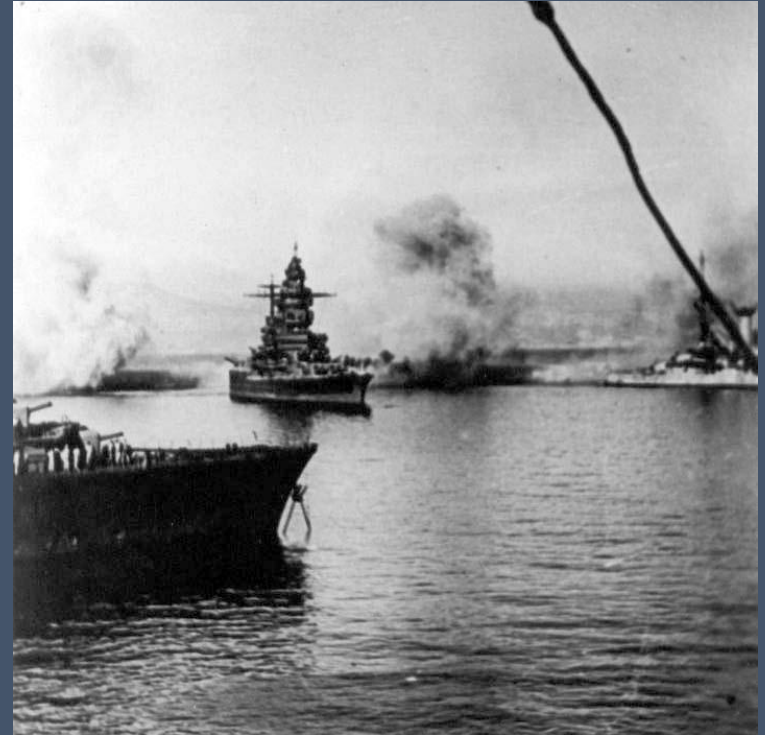




Britain effectively (if not officially) at war with Vichy France from July 1940 to November 1942.

Britain had attacked the Vichy French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir in French Algeria in July 1940, the French retaliated by bombing Gibraltar, but the USA and even Canada maintained diplomatic relations until Nov 1942.

Vichy French-controlled Lebanon and Syria bordered British-controlled Mandate Palestine.





SOE originally looked for help with land-based intelligence gathering and sabotage.

But in late 1940, asked the Haganah for volunteers trained in sea operations and sea-borne assault. Training commenced in the mouth of the Yarkon river on the northern edge of Tel Aviv, a little further up the coast near Herzliya and at Caesaria.

By May 1941, the Haganah was producing commando-trained personnel - the Friends - for land and sea operations, for SOE.



# Levant Fair site – Tel Aviv. Haganah's secret weapons factory.



The British saw the Vichy French territories as a threat to their interests in the Middle East and committed themselves to military action.

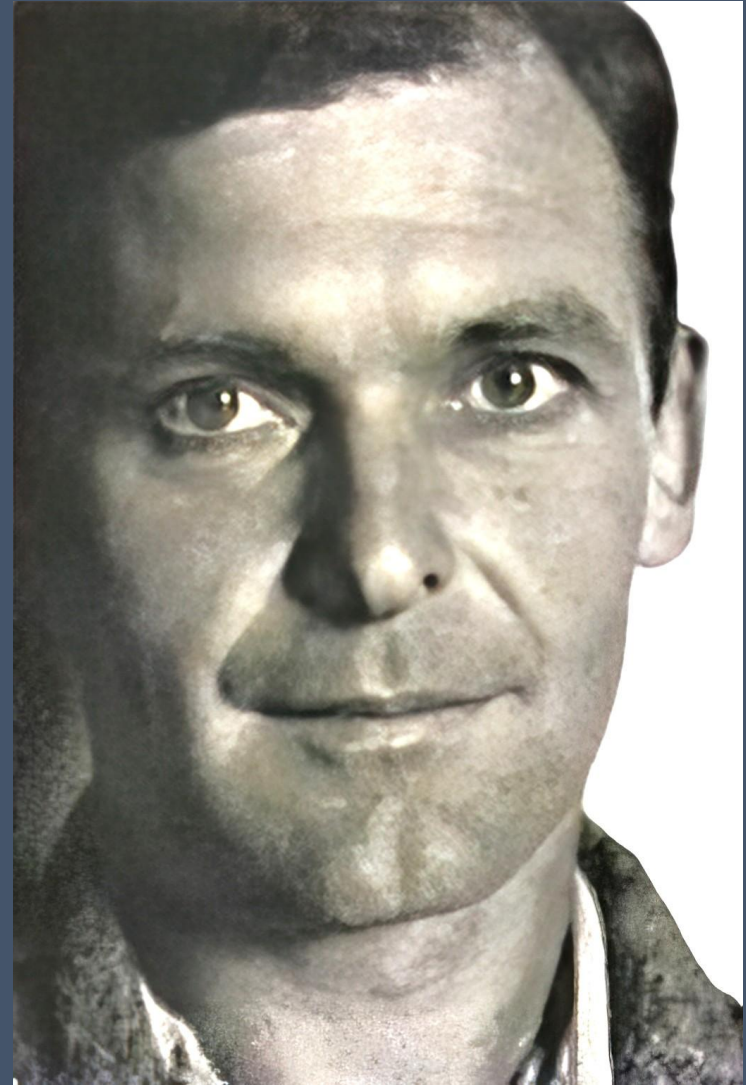
Already planning an invasion of Syria and Lebanon (*Operation EXPORTER*) for May (postponed to June) 1941 and were concerned that oil resources might be used by the German and Italian air forces who were expected to come to the aid of the Vichy French.

The Haganah agreed to support the British invasion and founded the Palmach – the elite fighting force of the Haganah.

Formed 15 May 1941 and immediately committed 22 (NB – not yet 23) of its best men to a sea-borne sabotage operation for the British, to precede the invasion of Lebanon and Syria.



We know that the 22 were trained in boat use by Capt. (later Lt-Colonel) Nicholas Hammond of SOE, formerly of Section D of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS/MI6) and commissioned in the Intelligence Corps.....



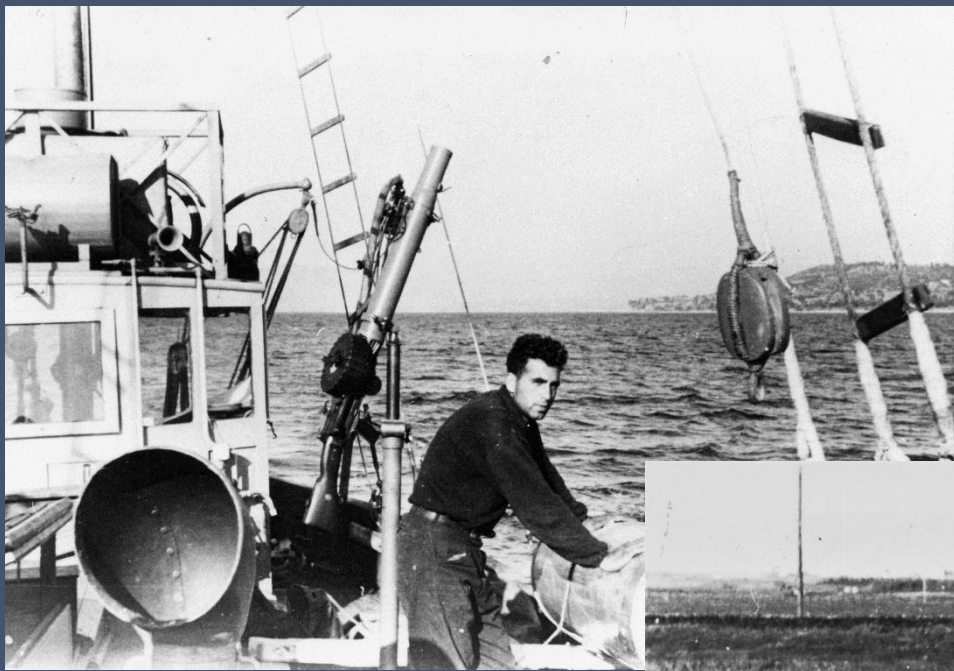


# The Palmach's naval section (from The Palmach Archive)









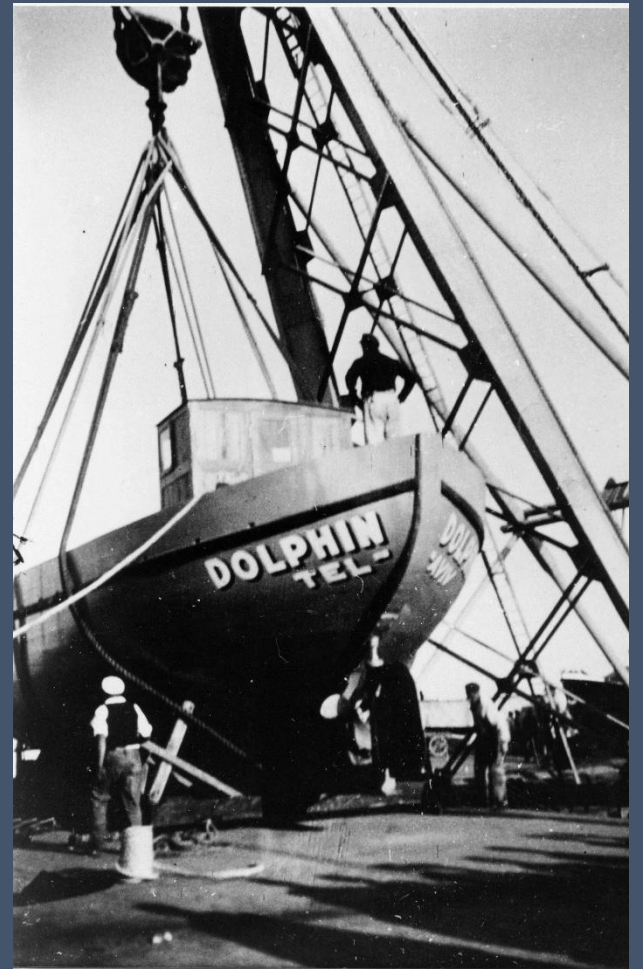




















**OPERATION BOATSWAIN** - the target - the Vichy French oil refinery and storage tanks at Tripoli, Lebanon – heavily defended.



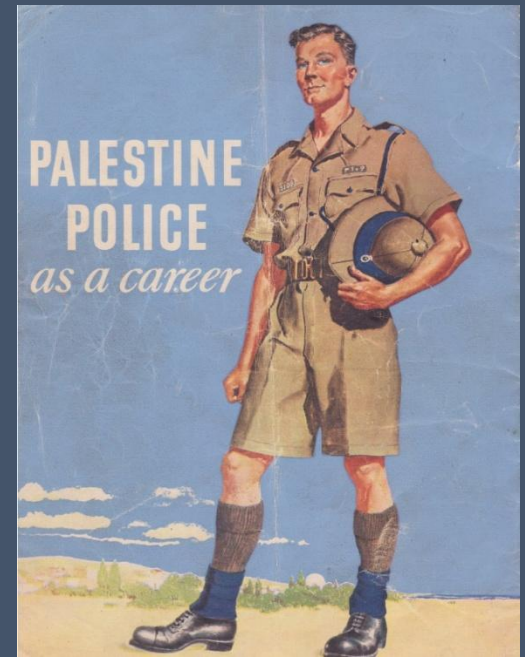
The Vichy French Army used colonial troops in Lebanon, including those from Senegal.



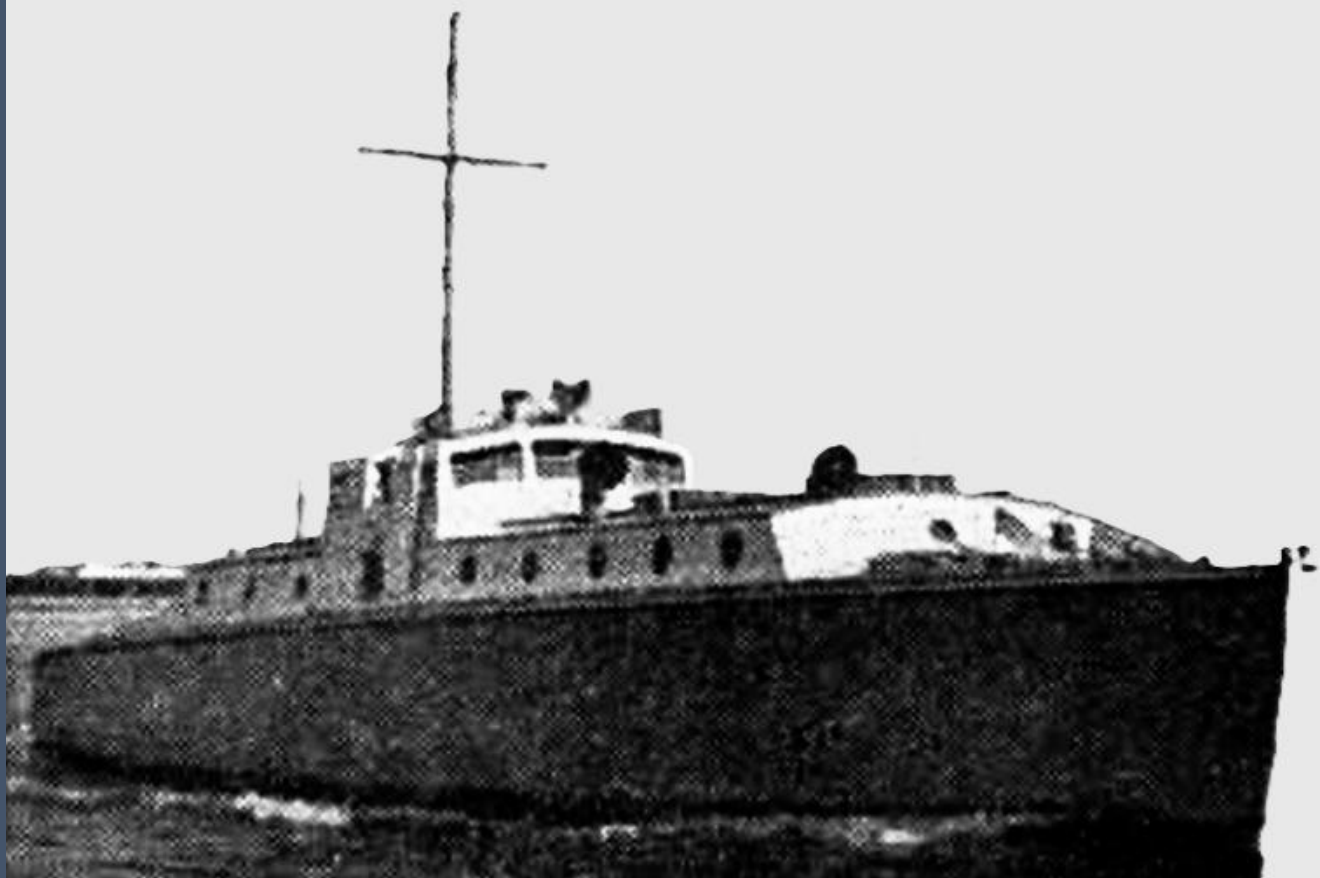
The boat —

SOE arranged for the Port and Marine Division of the Palestine Police Force to provide one of their launches — the *Sea Lion* (Ari Hayam).

Had been used as part of the Palestine Patrol against the landing of Jewish immigrants. Only 60' long, twin diesel engines driving twin screws. The boat was first sailed, by a Palmach crew, from Tel Aviv to Haifa.



# The *Sea Lion* (?)





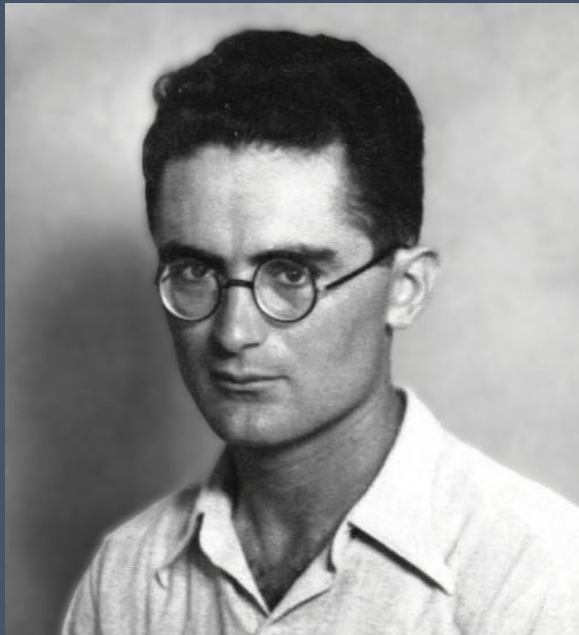
©National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, N14232



The *Shark* at Jaffa — a boat class suitable for the numbers and equipment of the operation? And in other than coastal waters?



The crew –  
the skipper was Warrant Officer Katriel  
Yaffe (left) and the Mate, Amiram  
Shohat (right).







The *Sea Lion* was sailed to Haifa during the day on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> May 1941, the point of departure being the seawater cooling pool of the power station at Haifa, a more secluded spot than the main harbour and with no workforce present on the Sabbath.

The weapons and explosives promised by the British from Egypt had failed to arrive. Replaced from Haganah stocks – but explosives unstable?

Another theory is that the Haganah preferred to use their own supplies, rather than rely on the British.

An engineer, Israel Norden, joined the group at Haifa – the 23<sup>rd</sup> man.

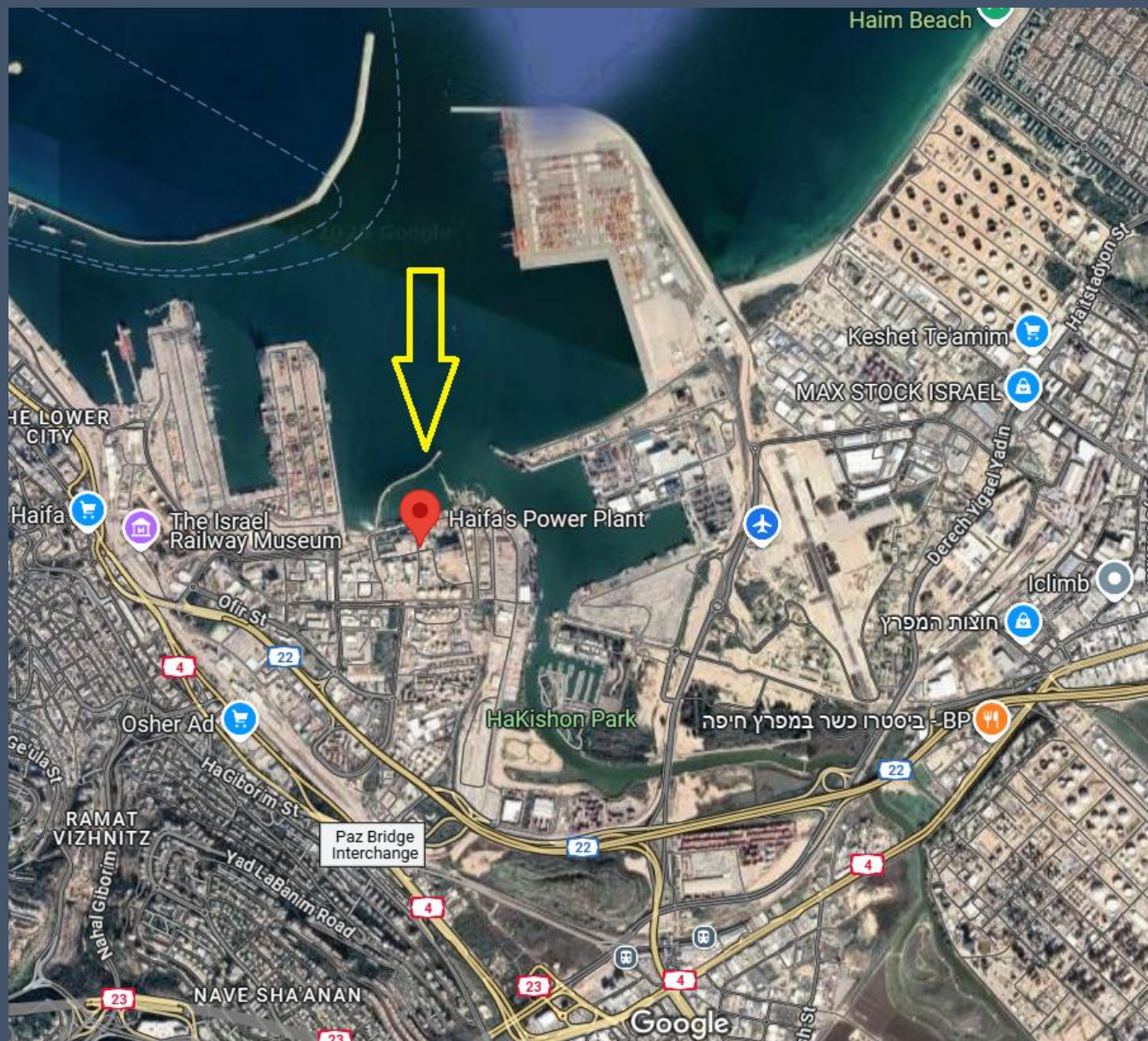
He was not part of the Palmach, but served on one of the Palestine Police launches that the British were using to intercept Jewish immigrants.

In reality, he was an undercover member of the Haganah, planted in the Palestine Police, in order to help sabotage the anti-immigrant operations.





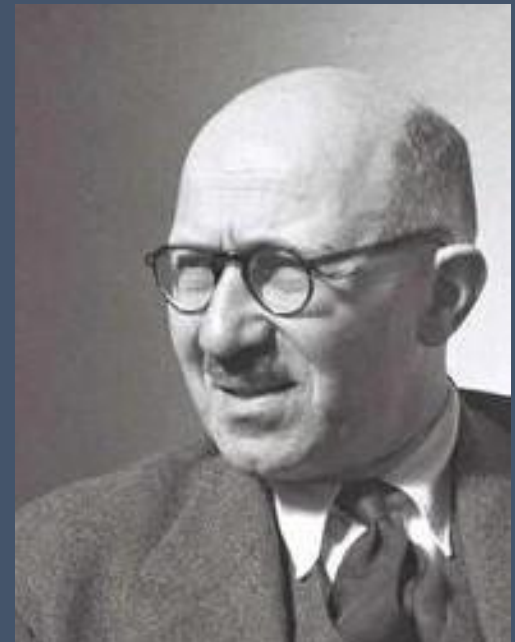




At Haifa, Lieutenant Zvi Spector (right) the operation's commander and Yitzhak Hecker, (bottom) deputy commander, and their men boarded the *Sea Lion* and loaded their replacement weapons, explosives, stores and two dinghies onto the launch.



Joined by their SOE Liaison Officer, Major Sir Anthony Palmer (top), who had stayed overnight in Haifa at the home of one of the Haganah's leaders, David Hachohen (bottom), Director of the Office of Public Works and Planning in Palestine.





A very different background to the 23:  
Anthony Frederick Mark Palmer succeeded in  
1931 to the title of 4th Baronet Palmer, of  
Grinkle Park, Yorkshire.



Educated Marlborough College, Oxford University and Royal Military College, Sandhurst.

Served in the Queen's Own Yorkshire Dragoons, in the Northumberland Fusiliers and in the Royal Artillery from where he joined the Special Operations Executive (SOE).

Liaison officer for **BOATSWAIN** – not the operation's commander. Not numbered among the 23.



Spector had orders not to land at Tripoli since he had an injured leg from a motorcycle accident. He had nevertheless insisted on still going on the operation.

In Spector's place, Hecker was to lead the sabotage party ashore, using the two dinghies loaded at Haifa. If unable to return to the boat, the assault party were given funds, the address of a safe house in the Beirut suburbs and addresses of Jews in Beirut and Damascus.

The route:

the *Sea Lion* was to first head westwards well out to sea on the morning of Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May, then head north to run parallel to the coast until turning back to a landfall north of Tripoli to land its Palmach commandos around midnight.

For the return journey in daylight – they were to head to one of the isolated bays on the easternmost side of Cyprus, then sail for Haifa at night. Similarly, if their outward journey proved slow, they would also lie up off Cyprus in order to spend the minimum amount of daylight sailing anywhere near the Lebanese coast.



Sunday morning, 18<sup>th</sup> May 1941: waves surprisingly high, even in the cooling pool sheltered by a breakwater. Yaffe, *Sea Lion's* skipper, therefore gave orders that everything had to be securely lashed down on the launch's deck.

Stowing of equipment took longer than expected – space at a premium – departure was delayed until, at 0700, an hour after the planned time, *Sea Lion* got under weigh and sailed slowly out to sea, watched by Hacoheh and two of his fellow Haganah leaders.





Nothing more was ever seen of The 23, or Major Palmer, after the *Sea Lion* disappeared over the horizon out of Haifa.

No attack took place on the oil refinery, but no enemy force ever claimed responsibility for the team's capture, ambush or destruction.

No bodies were conclusively found.

Evidence of  
just one radio  
message.

Received 1100  
hrs, four hours  
after leaving,  
18<sup>th</sup> May 1941.

'Boat OK, 60  
[miles?] from  
Haifa.'

TNA HS 3/211

**FILE** *Signal* **ACTION**

NR.S.O.2/095

JERUSALEM ALEXANDER      DISTN S.O.2.      *A.C.S.S.*, G.7.      III    II

27.5.41.    1638      28.5.41.    0645    BST

CXG 206

ADDRESSED LONDON 206 REPEATED CAIRO 127.

MY IMMEDIATELY PRECEDING TELEGRAM.

*Attending?*  
G. (CGR. MUT.) BY SEA IN NAVAL LAUNCH ATTEMPTED ON  
MAY 18TH BY 22 FRIENDS LED BY D.H.96 *Palmer* REPEAT 96. WIRELESS,  
O.K. RECEIVED AT 1100 HOURS ON MAY 18TH. REPORTING BOAT O.K.  
ABOUT 60 <sup>miles?</sup> FROM HAIFA. SINCE THEN NO NEWS. WATCHER AT TRIPOLI  
REPORTS BOAT NEVER REACHED THERE. MAY HAVE ENCOUNTERED  
FRENCH NAVAL UNIT WHICH LEFT BEIRUT ABOUT MAY 18TH. ONLY  
APPARENT POSSIBILITIES ARE ~~ANY~~ CAPTURE OR FOUNDERED. *tele*

H. INTENSIVE PROPAGANDA EFFORT FOR SYRIA AND IRAK AND BY  
AIR FROM PALESTINE AND BY +36 FROM TRANS JORDAN.

21477

+ AS CODED.

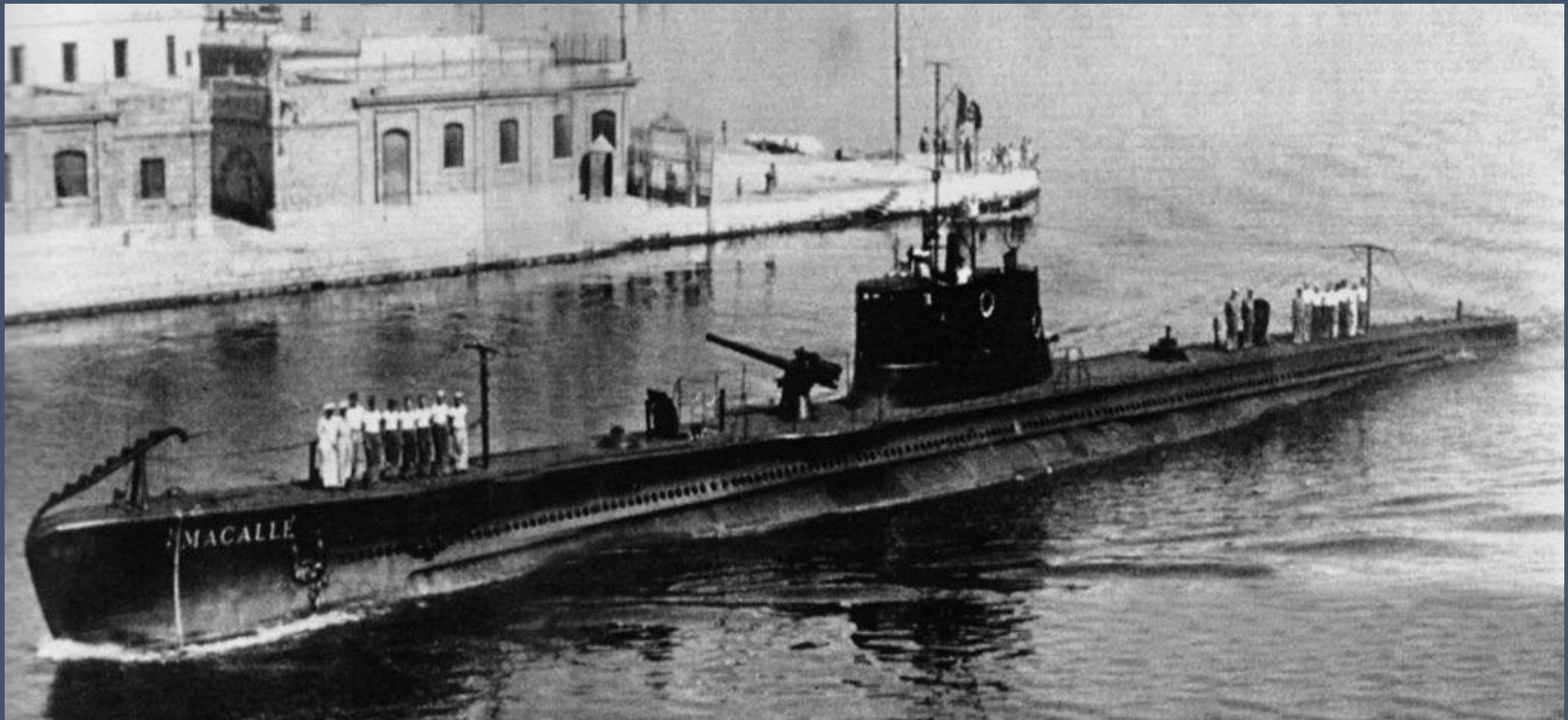
TP      2334      29.5.41.      (MRD).      *PR*

The disappearance – at least eight theories:

1) blown up by the (unstable?) explosives carried;

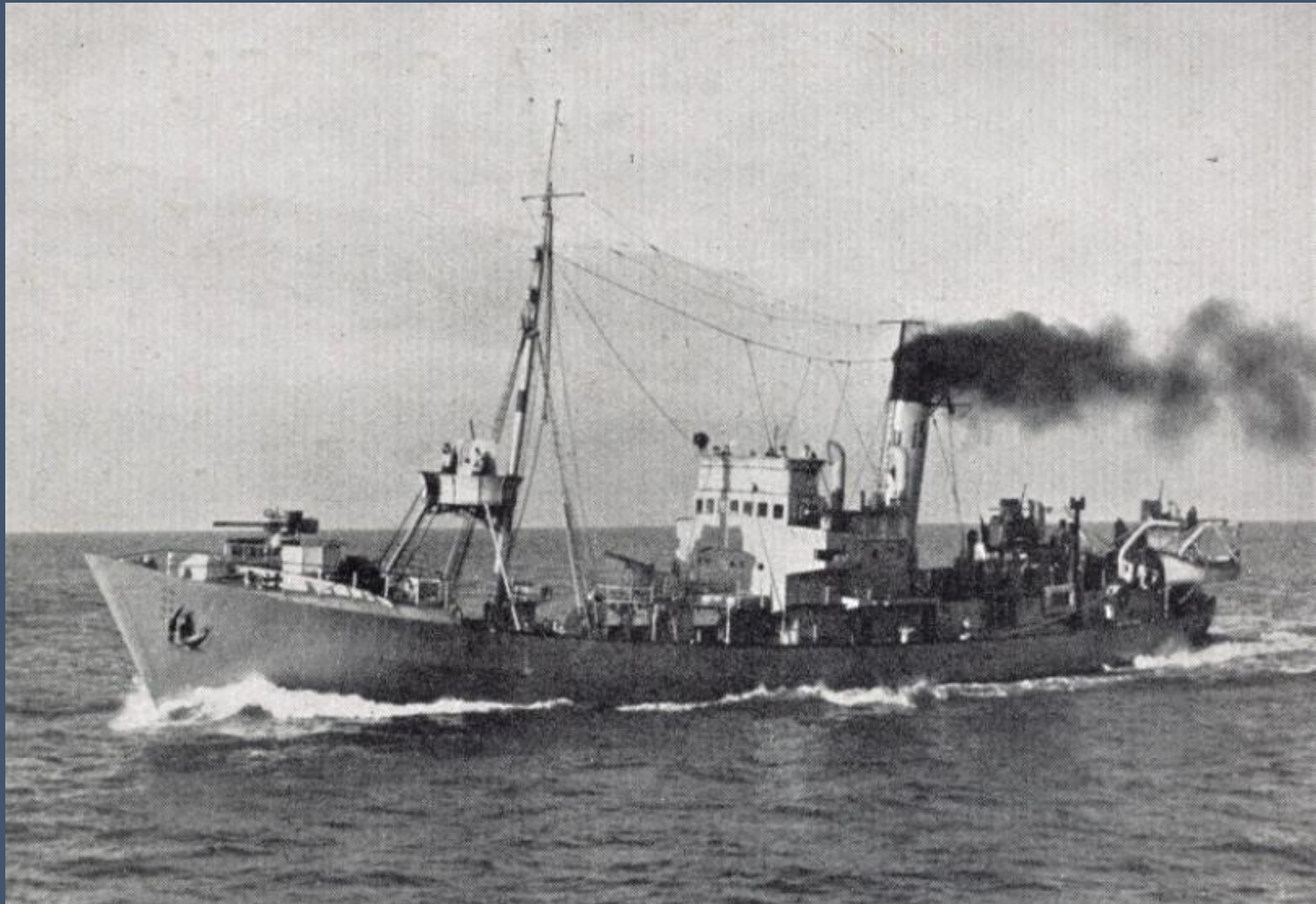


2) sunk by an Italian submarine, enemy intelligence services having uncovered the operation;



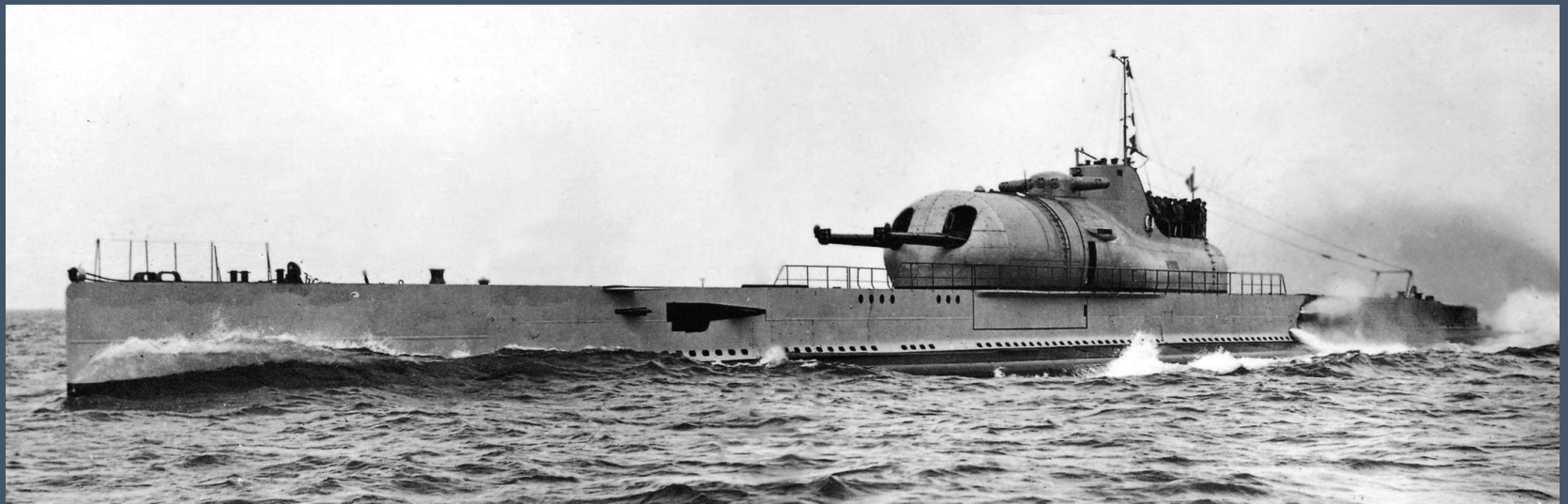


3) intercepted and sunk by the Vichy French coastguard;

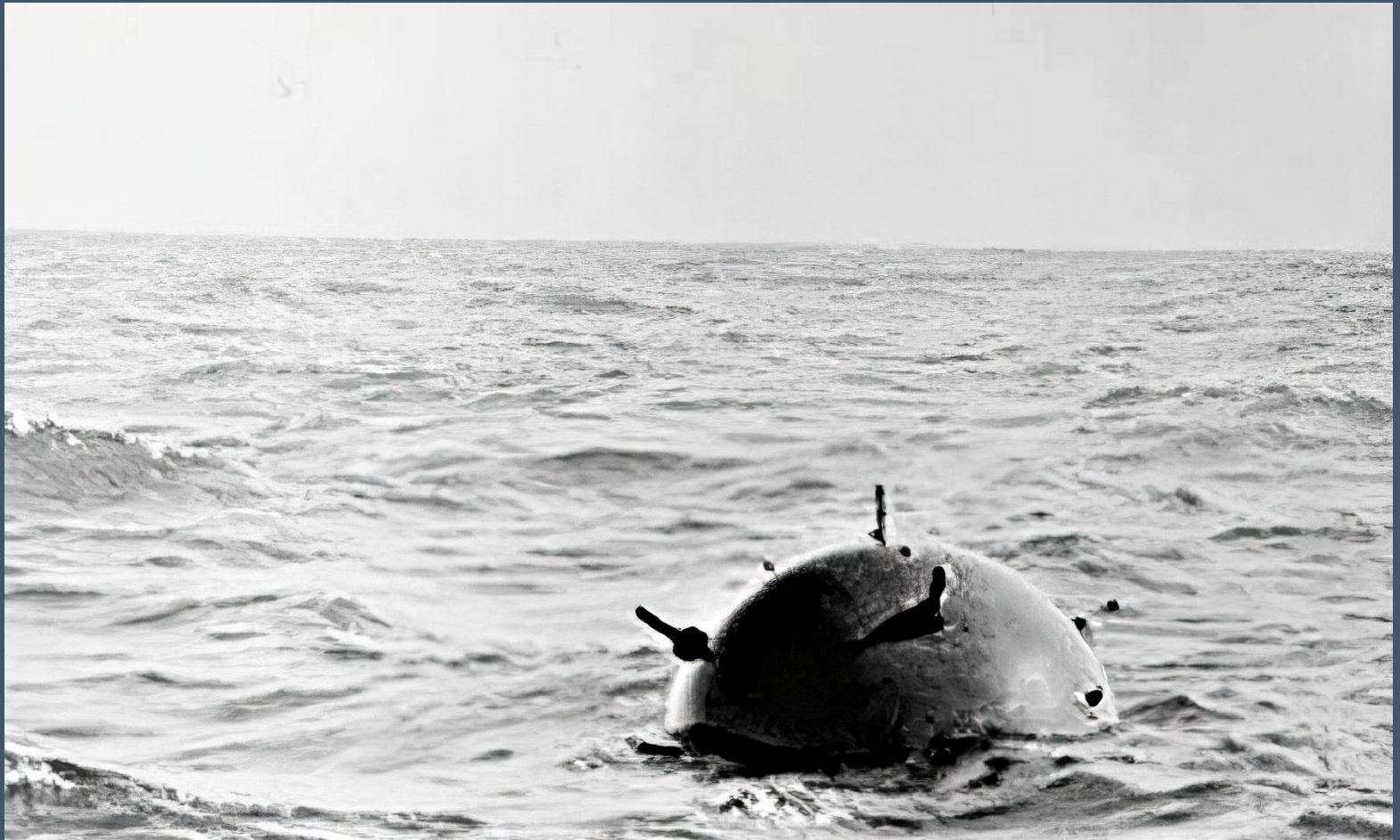




4) sunk by the *Surcouf*, a Vichy French cruiser submarine at sea in the area;



5) sank after hitting a mine;



6) surprised by Vichy French/Senegalese troops when landing, killed or taken prisoner and later executed;



7) capsized at sea  
in rough  
weather. Possibly  
following engine  
failure.





Disastrous start for the Palmach.

Badly affected morale in the nascent Naval Section, seen as a tragedy by the Haganah leaders who realised they had lost many of their finest recruits and future leaders.

David Hachohen:

‘My heart was breaking’.



An aside – but another, similar, failure....

7<sup>th</sup> June 1941: G (R), 8-man attack, by motor boat from Haifa, on telephone lines near Beirut.

Cpl Rapoport, of Tel Aviv, drowned.

C O P Y.

APPENDIX 'D'.

STATEMENT BY NO.774645 CPL.LEWDONSKI

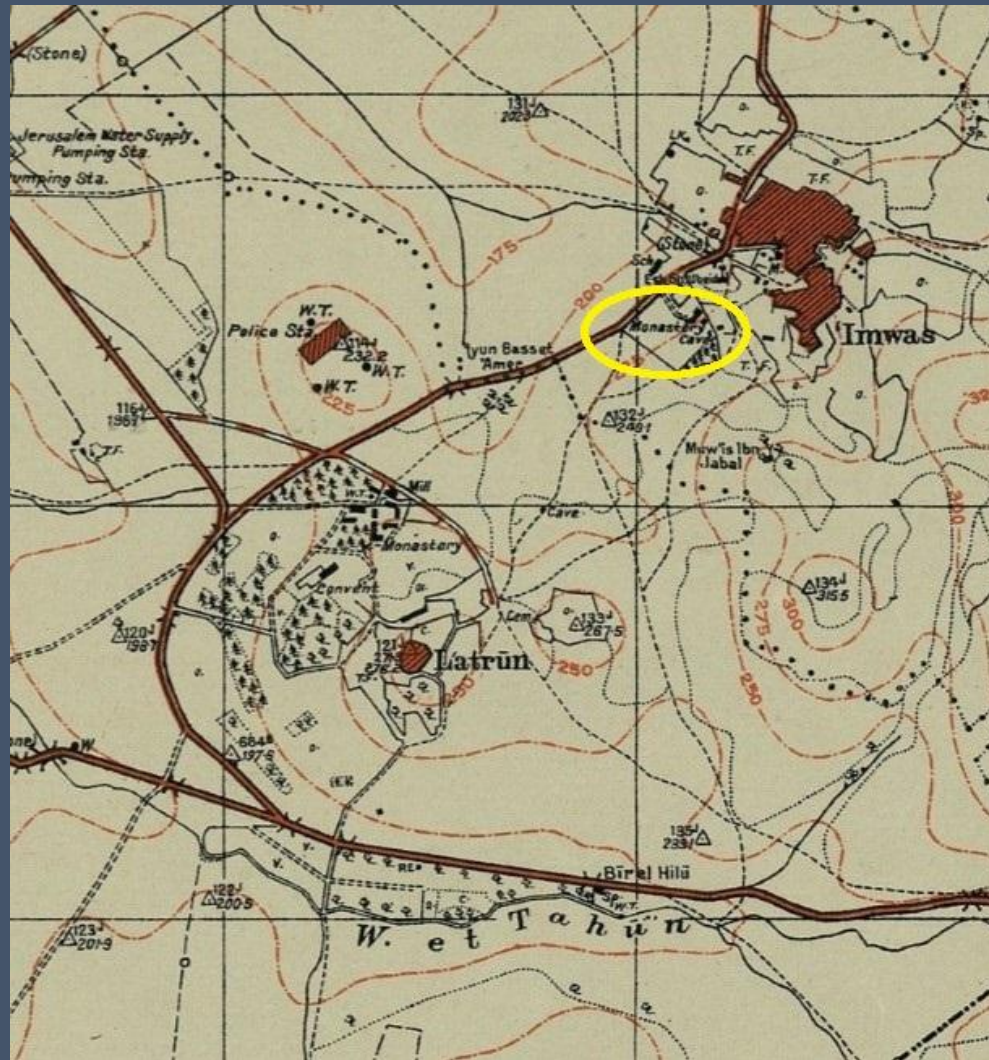
AND

NO.774415 CPL.GILBOA

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On 7th June at 1900 hrs in company with Lieut.Commander Marshall,Capt.,Scaife R.C.S.,2/Lieut Vanden Berger,Cpl.,Drori and Cpl.Rapoport,Ahmed Ottman,we left Haifa in the motor boat 'Mona Lisa' for a destination on the Syrian coast near Beyrouth,which we approached at about 2400 hrs the same day. Lt.Comdr.,Marshall,Capt.,Scaife and Cpl.Rapoport,left in our dingy for the coast,the sea was rough,most of us had been seasick. About an hour and a half later Capt.,Scaife returned to the boat by swimming. He reported that the small boat had capsized and that Lieut.Comdr.,Marshall and Cpl.Rapoport were missing,he believed them to be drowned,and that he had cut the telephone wires. We waited in the same neighbourhood for another hour and then as it was getting light we turned back. We had little experience of navigation and hit rocks. The 'Mona Lisa' started to sink by the bow. Eventually we turned on the boat's light and fired pistols in the air to attract attention.

G (R) at Imwas..... In the Emaus-Nicopolis monastery near Latrun. (1942 British map).





But both sides determined to continue:  
establishment of SOE training facilities and 'Friends  
Scheme' from April 1942. Another story.....

1 – Special Training School  
(STS) 102 – Stella Maris  
monastery and other  
nearby sites on Mt Carmel  
– and boat training in  
Haifa harbour

2 – STS 102 weapons  
training at Athlit/Atlit

3 – parachute training at  
RAF Ramat David

4 – STS 102 paramilitary  
training at Megiddo

5 – Palmach training at  
Mishmar HaEmek

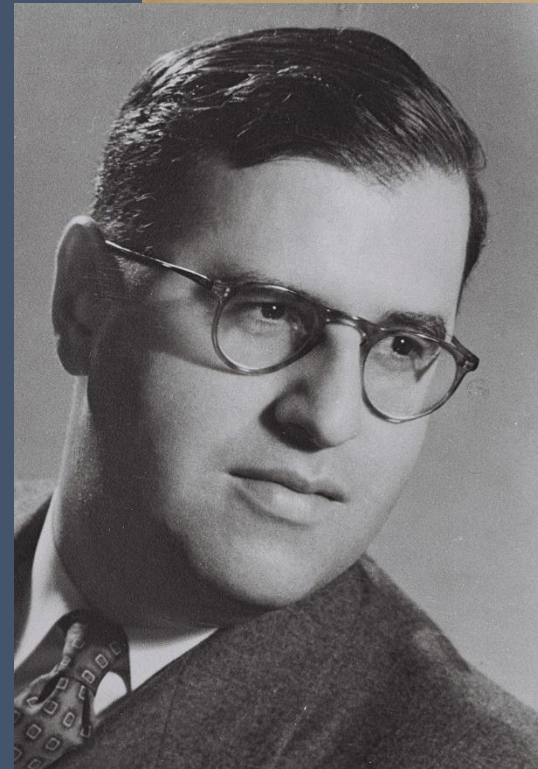
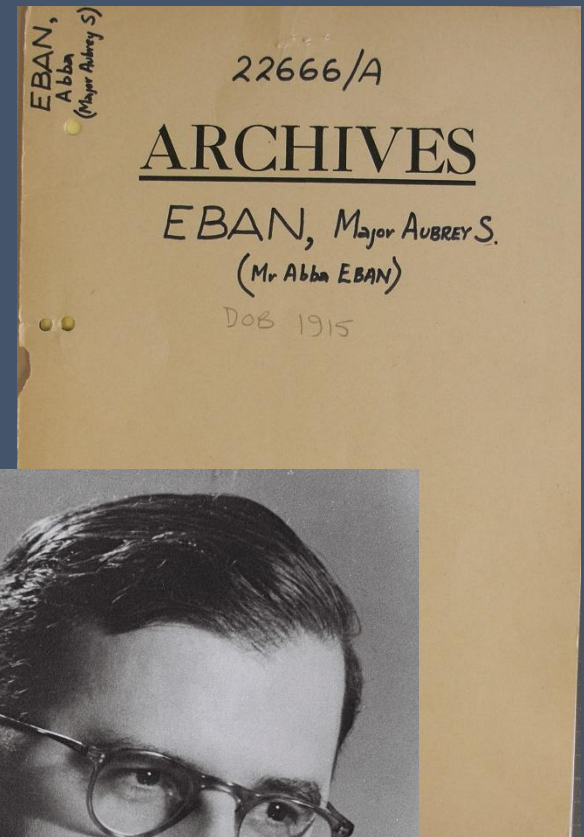




Important SOE/Jewish  
community liaison  
officer:

Major Abba Eban, SOE,  
formerly South Staffs  
Regt., British Army.

Later UN rep; US  
Ambassador, Minister of  
Educ & Culture, Deputy  
Prime Minister, Minister  
of Foreign Affairs for  
Israel.



The final word as to what happened to BOATSWAIN?

2014

*23 Fallen Soldiers:  
the Final Investigation*

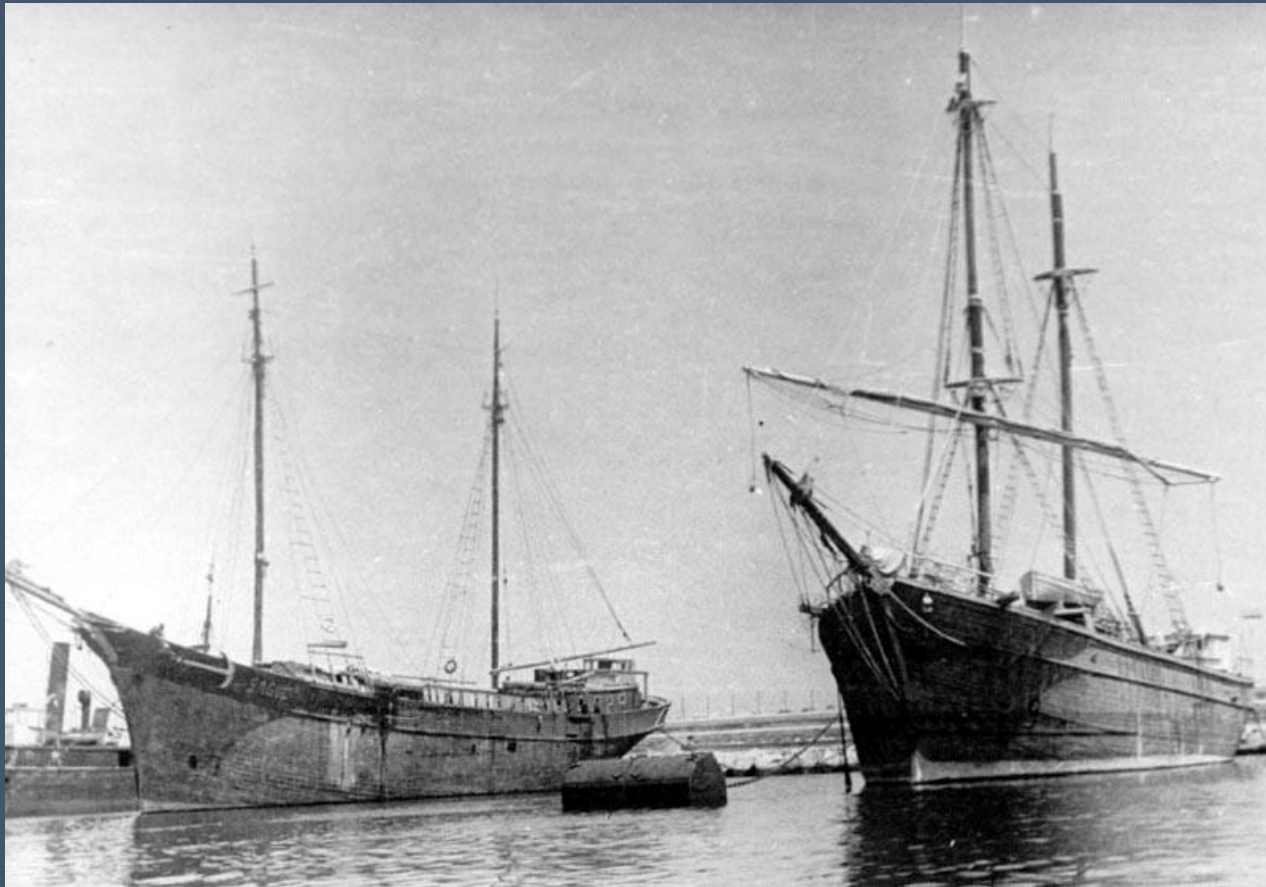
with further evidence from the  
Israeli Navy, suggesting high  
seas.





## Commemoration of the 23:

The *Kaf Gimel Yordei Ha'sira* ship (left) and the schooner *Amiram Shohat* – 1946



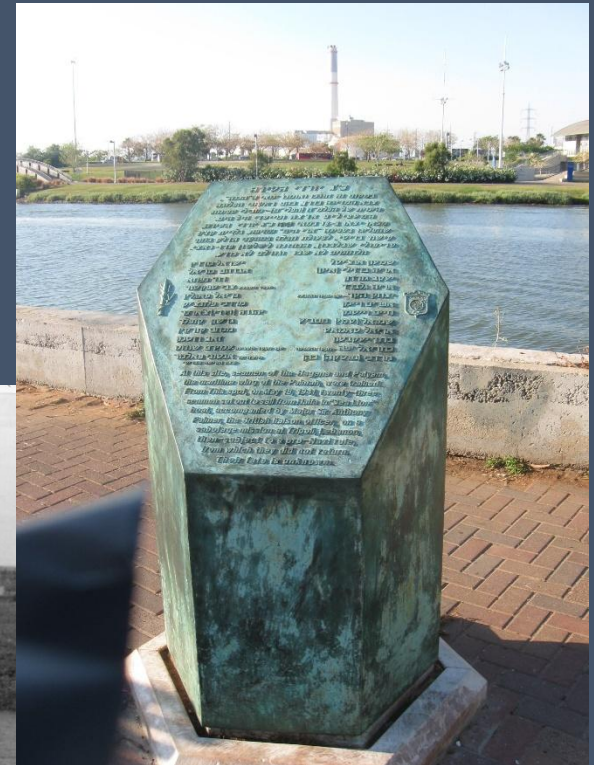


in Israel:

Street names; (below) the Yordei Ha'sira monument and gardens in Tel Aviv



# At the Tel Aviv departure point on the Yarkon river.





# Mount Hertzl national cemetery, Jerusalem



The naval college in Akko (Acre) -  
where Lt Spector's wife was a  
manager.





And individual memorials  
– eg to Ariel Temes in  
Jerusalem.



And in Britain.....

# 2016 - Brookwood Military Cemetery, nr Pirbright, Surrey – and its Memorial to the Missing 1939-45









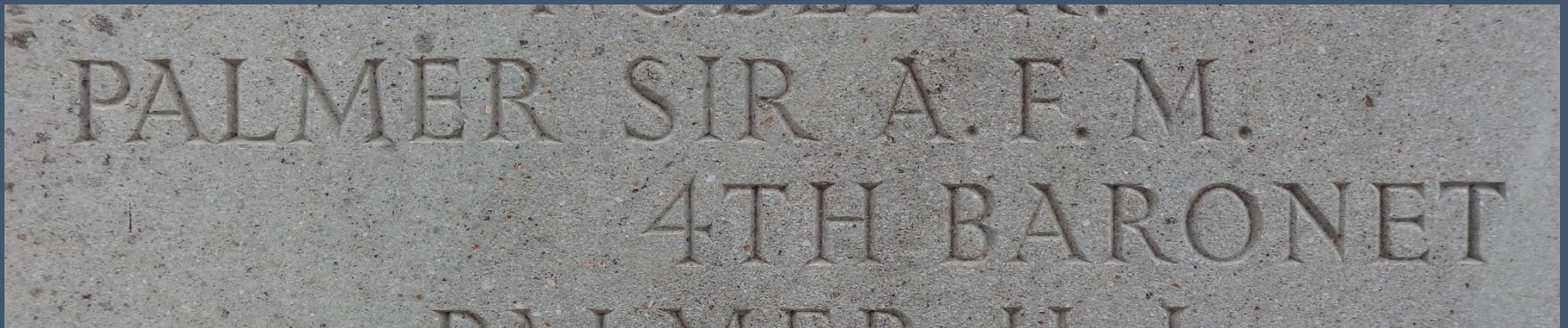
2016 – Martin Sugarman

23 names added to the  
Memorial to the Missing  
1939-45.



## Brookwood Memorial 1939-45.

Commemorates 3,500 men and women of the British forces "to whom the fortunes of war denied a known and honoured grave". The memorial was unveiled by HM Queen Elizabeth II on 25 October 1958. Included Major Palmer.





# May 2017 – unveiling by Israeli Ambassador to the UK, Mark Regev





May 8, 2017

Dear Friends,

I join you today in commemorating the 23 Palmach members who lost their lives in Operation Boatswain.

The story of the brave Jewish fighters who took part in the Palmach's first mission against the Nazis and their allies is widely known in Israel. Theirs is a story of incredible courage and dedication. Their heroism reflected the Palmach's readiness to contribute to the Allied war effort against the Axis powers and its enormous sacrifice during World War II.

Over the years, Israel has invested great efforts to discover the truth behind the fighters' disappearance and their tragic deaths. Unfortunately, much remains unknown about their final moments.

The State of Israel has honored their memory, including by naming streets, monuments, ships and even the school for marine officers in Acre after them. However, their story is less familiar abroad. I deeply appreciate your efforts to preserve the memory of our brave men by adding their names to the Memorial to the Missing in the Brookwood Military Cemetery. Like the other gallant soldiers whose names appear on the Memorial and whose fates remain unknown, our Palmach fighters paid the highest price in our shared fight of good over evil, of light over darkness.

May their memory be forever blessed.

Sincerely,

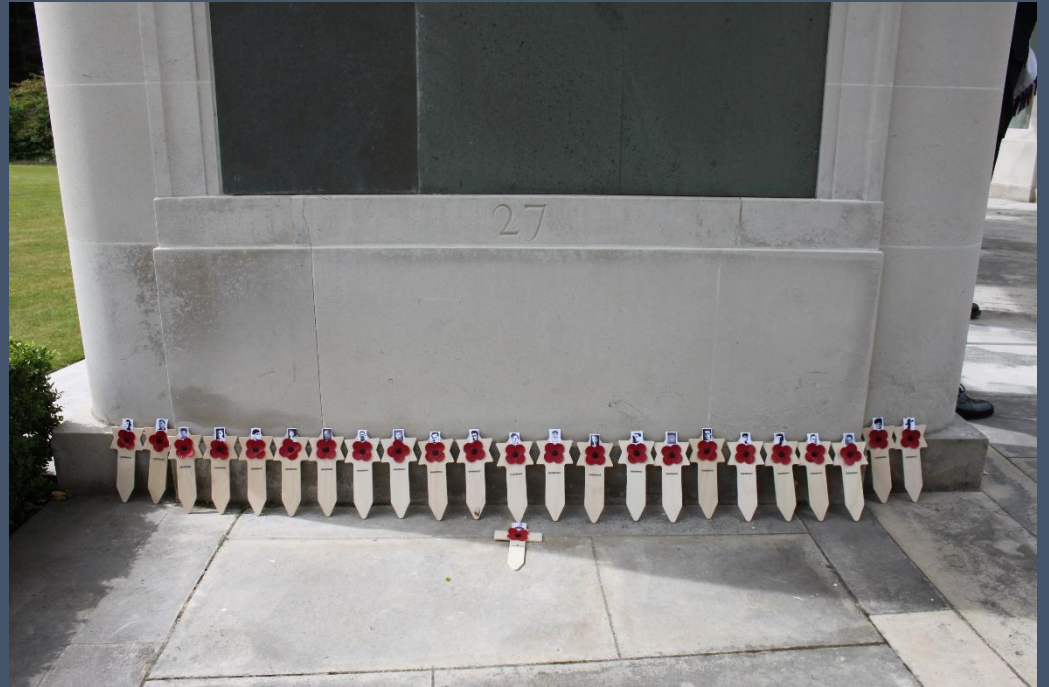
Benjamin Netanyahu

Jerusalem, Israel













**THE 23 PALMACH JEWISH VOLUNTEERS AND BRITISH LIAISON OFFICER LOST IN**

**OPERATION BOATSWAIN - כ"ג יורדי הסירה**

**OF THE SPECIAL OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE (S.O.E.) - 18TH MAY 1941**



Gilbert Ariei



Mordehai Cohen



Ariei Eizen



Jacob Gordon



Sami Hanovitz



Isaac Hecker

(Deputy Commander)



Baruch Jacobson



Gershon Kopler



Menahem Kurakin



David Nafha



Israel Norden



Abraham Nurfel



Neriel Paglin



Mordehay Plonchik



Zeev Rotman



Amiram Shohet



Zvi Spector  
(Commander)



Ariel Temes



Shimon Utchitel



Ephraim Veiman



Haim Weisman



Katriel Yofe



Yehuda Zemer



Major Sir Anthony Palmer  
(British Liaison Officer)

And since.....





# Brigadier General (retired) Iftach Spector



# Ambassador Gershon Gan





# Professor Dan Levanon, son of Baruch Jacobsen



# Annual event at Brookwood Military Cemetery



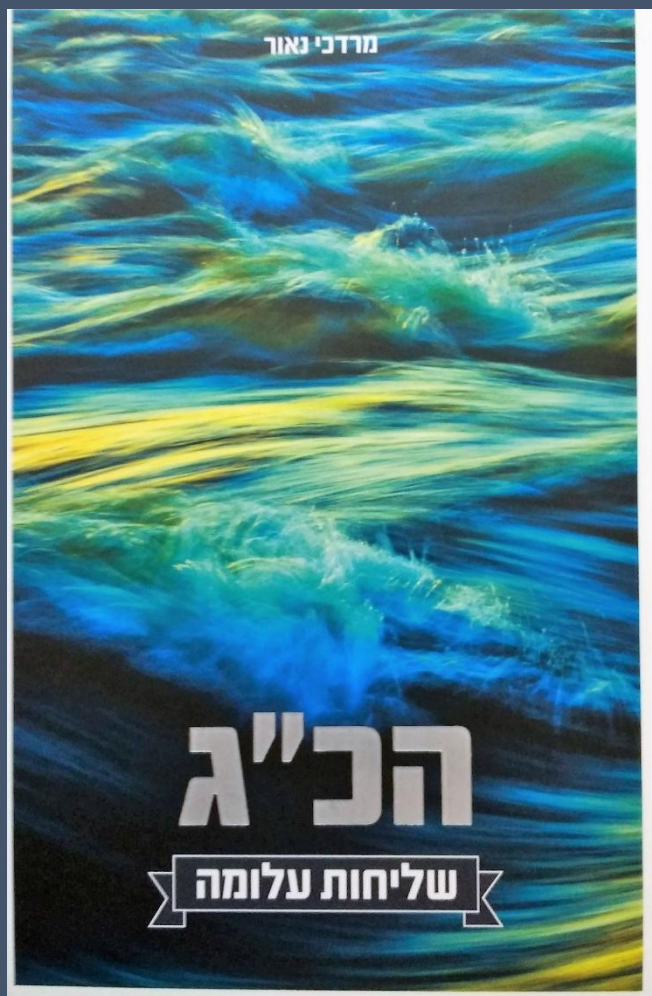








# 2019 The Kaf Gimel – Obscure Mission by Dr Mordechai Naor




נוקם המללח שמוחיהם של הכ"ג בחלקת הנעדרים של בית הקברות הצבאי בברוקלין, אנגליה. שגריר ישראל מרק רגב חושף את לוח השמות, מאי 2017

מחקר שנערך על ידי מר מרטין שוגרמן, מטעם האגודה של לוחמות ולוחמים יהודים לשעבר בצבא בריטניה אישר, כי ה-23 היו מתנדבים במסגרת ה-SOE. ב-2016, ועדת קברי המלחמה של חבר העמים הבריטי (CWGC), נתנה את אישורה להוסיף את שמות ה-23 לאחר ההצעה לנעדרים בבית הקברות הצבאי בברוקלין, כפי שהדבר נעשה לגבי סר אנתוני פאלמר. הנושא הזה מתועד היטב בישראל, אך כמעט לא ידוע בממלכה המאוחדת.

פול מק-קיו, הנאמן של רשת המורשת של המבצעים הסודיים במלחמת העולם השנייה, היה האחראי לארגון הטקס. מרטין שוגרמן סיפק את הפרטים על המבצע ב-1941, וציין כי עד היום לא ידוע איך נספו הלוחמים: האם סירתם טבעה ואולי הם הגיעו לחוף ושם נהרגו.

השגריר הישראלי רגב הקריא בטקס אגרת מיוחדת מראש ממשלת ישראל, בנימין נתניהו. אל"ם רן כהנא, הנספח הצבאי בשגרירות ישראל בלונדון, הקריא את שמוחיהם של ה-23. לאחר דקת דומייה נשא הרב הראשי של צבא הוד מלכותה, מייג'ור ראובן ליווינגסטון, תפילה לזכר הנופלים.

גרשון גן, קרוב משפחה של עמירם שוחט, אחד מה-23, נשא דברים בשם משפחות הנופלים. הוא אמר שהוא גאה לייצג את המשפחות ומלא תודה על שה-23 מונצחים עכשיו בממלכה המאוחדת.

בקהל נוכחו, כמו כן, בני משפחה נוספים של ה-23, יחד עם נציגים של רשת המורשת של המבצעים הסודיים במלחמת העולם השנייה. בהם היה ההיסטוריון של ה-SOE ותושב גילפורד, קארול בראון. כן השתתפו בטקס נציגים של ועדת קברי המלחמה, של האקדמיה הצבאית בסנדהרסט ושל מרכז האימונים הצבאי במחנה פירברייט.

30 במאי 2017, Gilford Dragon News

2020 – presentation by  
amutakesher.org.il – the IDF  
Communications Association.  
Discovery that a radio signal had been  
received, followed by extract from war  
diary of 84 Sqn RAF



HABANIYA.			We lost one of our a/c. destroyed & 2 damaged in a shoot up of HABANIYA. Six of our "
AQIR.	21.5.	A.M.	aircraft bombed and strafed RASMEH aerodrome. P/O. Keeble White returned from EGYPT with spares. Sgt. Bailey does recce for drifting "
HABANIYA.	"	"	motor boat off N. Palestinian coast. All our aircraft moved to "Y" landing ground. "

*21.5.41 a.m. Sgt Bailey does recce for  
drifting motor-boat off N. Palestinian  
coast.*

*But SOE not notified.*



The legacy and the lineage  
from The 23:

Palmach 1941



Palyam 1945 – the naval company of the  
Palmach



Israeli Naval Service 1948



Shayetet (Flotilla) 13 – the IDF naval  
commando SF unit 1949



They shall grow not old,  
As we who are left grow old,

Age shall not weary them,  
Nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the  
sun, and in the morning,  
We will remember them.



Any questions?

(via chat)





SOE established their STS/STC/ME 102 paramilitary training school at the vacated Stella Maris monastery and other sites on Mount Carmel above Haifa.....



With an outstation at Megiddo – the ancient site of Armageddon.....





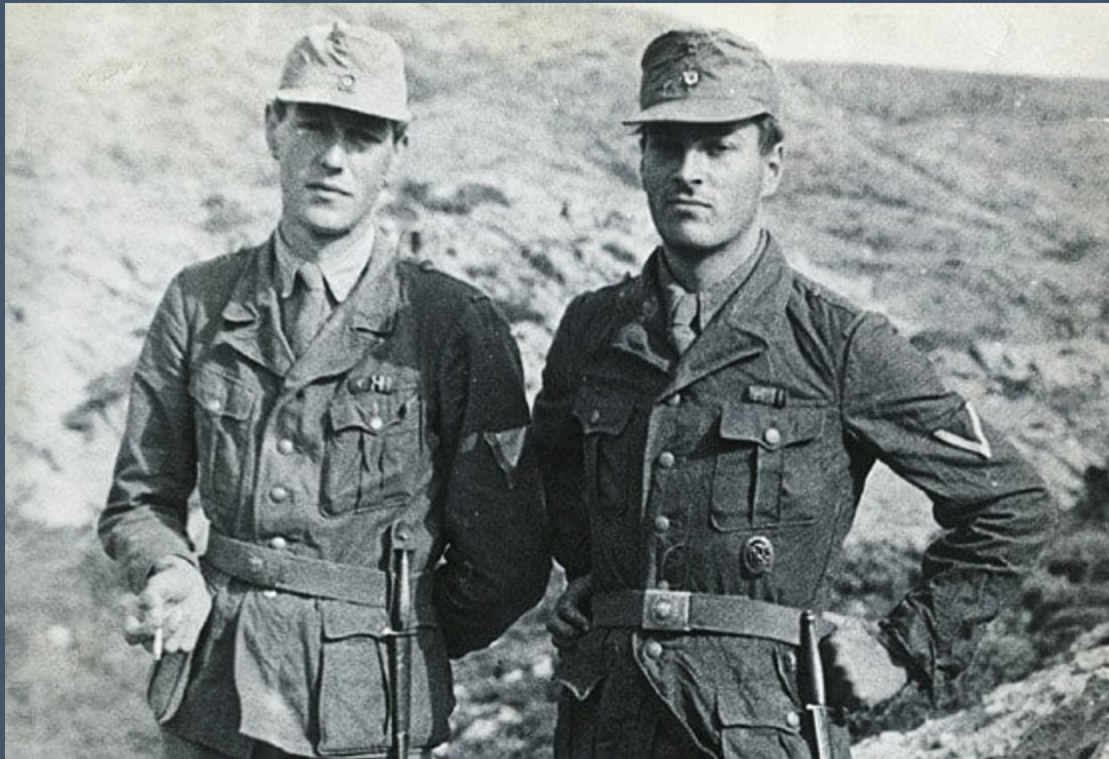
Athlit/Atlit – weapons training in the bay and using the ruins of the Crusader castle.



SOE's chief weapons training officer at the time was Capt. (later Major) Patrick 'Paddy' Leigh-Fermor, SOE – formerly Irish Guards and Intelligence Corps.



# Crete 1944 with W. Stanley 'Billy' Moss – the kidnapping of General Karl Heinrich Kreipe.





# Training of Palmach at Mishmar HaEmek



# Parachute training at RAF Ramat David

